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AUTHOR Greif, Esther Blank
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ABSTRACT

This study examined sex differences in the use of interruptions and simultaneous speech during conversations between parents and preschool children. In our society, children are usually taught not to interrupt a person who is talking, yet many adults themselves interrupt others. In fact, it seems that interruptions can be used acceptably under certain circumstances. To reduce the likelihood of speakers talking at the same time, people in a conversation typically obey turn-taking rules. Even though simultaneous speech seems more accidental than interruptions, one speaker can take advantage of the situation to maintain or gain control. Subjects were 16 children ages 2 to 5, and both their parents. Each parent-child pair engaged in semi-structured play for 30 minutes. Instances of interruptions by parents and children were recorded, as well as occurrences of simultaneous speech. Results reported are mean differences. There were no significant differences between boys and girls in the use of these two conversational techniques. However, fathers interrupted more and spoke simultaneously more often than mothers did. Further, both parents were more likely to interrupt their daughters and to speak simultaneously with their daughters. Results were discussed in relation to the power differences between men and women, and in reference to the socialization of children into male and female sex roles. (Author/RH)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN PARENT-CHILD CONVERSATIONS

Esther Blank Greif

Boston University

Department of Psychology
64 Cummington Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

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Abstract

The current study examined sex differences in the use of two conversational management techniques, interruptions and simultaneous speech, during conversations between parents and preschool children. Subjects were sixteen children, ages 2 to 5, and both their parents. Each parent-child pair engaged in semi-structured play for 30 minutes. There were no significant differences between boys and girls in the use of these two conversational techniques. However, fathers interrupted more and spoke simultaneously more than mothers did. Further, both parents were more likely to interrupt their daughters and to speak simultaneously with their daughters. Results were discussed in relation to the power differences between men and women, and in reference to the socialization of children into male and female sex roles.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN PARENT-CHILD CONVERSATIONS

Esther Blank Greif

Boston University

Language is one of the major tools used in the process of sex-role socialization. Messages about sex roles are conveyed to children from actual content of speech, as well as from the style of speech (e.g., which words are emphasized, etc.) and from nonverbal behaviors which accompany speech (e.g., smiling). The current study looks at conversational management, to see who regulates the conversation when parents and children are talking. Specifically, this study examines two management techniques--interrupting and speaking simultaneously--and looks at their use in conversations between parents and their preschool children.

Recent studies of language have found that males and females use language differently (cf. Bodine, 1975). Lakoff (1973), in a paper titled "Language and woman's place", suggested that women's speech is more polite and less forceful than the speech of men. She argues that women are socialized to their special style, and are discouraged from using the male style, which is more neutral. It has also been suggested (Henley, 1975) that women are more sensitive to nonverbal cues of other people than men are, and are therefore more polite speakers. Both interrupting someone and speaking at the same time as someone show impoliteness and inattention of one speaker to another.

In our society, children are usually taught not to interrupt a person who is talking. Yet many adults themselves interrupt others. In fact, it seems that interruptions can be used acceptably under certain circumstances. For instance, individuals in high status positions may interrupt people of

lower status (cf. Henley, 1977). Further, if interruptions can be used to demonstrate power and status, then one might predict that men would interrupt more than women. In fact, there is evidence that this is the case. Zimmerman and West (1975) compared the naturalistic conversations of male-female adult pairs with conversations of male-male and female-female pairs. They found that there were many more interruptions in the opposite sex pairs than in same-sex pairs. Even more striking was their finding that males were more likely to interrupt the speech of women than vice versa. One aim of the current study was to examine interruptions of parents during interactions with their preschool children, to determine if fathers interrupt children more than mothers.

A second aim of the study was to examine the incidence of simultaneous speech. Typically in a conversation both people obey rules of turn-taking which are designed to reduce the likelihood of speakers talking at the same time (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). But simultaneous speech still does occur. When it does, adults may smile at each other, recognizing the turn-taking or transition error, and then one person gives up the floor. Even though simultaneous speech seems more accidental than interruptions, one speaker can take advantage of the situation to maintain or gain control. If fathers are using simultaneous speech as a conversational management technique, possibly a result of their socialization into male language patterns, then fathers may engage in more simultaneous speech with their children than mothers.

Finally, this study looks at the effect of a child's sex on parents' tendencies to interrupt and speak simultaneously. Parents may interact differently with boys and girls, for a variety of reasons (e.g., cues from the child; parent expectations; etc.). If so, we might find differences in conversations with boys and girls. For example, parents may be more polite

with sons than with daughters.

To sum, then, there were three major aims of the current study:

1) to see if there are sex differences between mothers and fathers in the use of interruptions;
2) to see if there are sex differences between mothers and fathers in the incidence of simultaneous speech; and,
3) to see if either of these features differs in the speech of parents to boys and girls.

METHOD

Subjects. Sixteen middle-class children, 8 boys and 8 girls, and both their parents participated in the study. Children ranged in age from 2 to 5 years, with a mean age of 3-1/2 years.

Procedure. Each child visited a laboratory playroom twice, once with each parent. During each visit, the parent-child pair was asked to engage in three activities during a 30-minute play session. The activities included reading a book which had no words, playing with a toy car that had removable parts, and using food items and a cash register to play pretend store. All play sessions were videotaped, conversations were transcribed, and utterances were marked.

Coding. Instances of interruptions by parents and children were recorded, as well as occurrences of simultaneous speech. Interruptions were coded when one person began to talk while the other person was already speaking. For example, if during the play store situation a child started to say, "I'm going to buy some..." and the parent at that point said, "Why don't you buy some peanut butter?", an interruption would be coded. Simultaneous speech was coded when both speakers began to speak at the same time.

RESULTS

For each family, all instances of interruptions and simultaneous speech were converted to percentages based on a) total number of parent utterances; b) total number of child utterances; or c) total number of utterances of parent and child combined.

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the mean number of

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Insert Table 1 about here

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utterances used during the 30-minute play sessions. As one can see, parents spoke more than their children. There were no significant differences in the number of utterances used by mothers vs. fathers, or in the number of utterances used by parents to boys vs. girls.

The mean number of interruptions by parents and children, and mean number of instances of simultaneous speech, are contained in Table 2. From

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Insert Table 2 about here

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inspection, one can see that there were more instances of simultaneous speech than of interruptions. Further, parents tended to interrupt their children 7.8 times per play session. The range of number of interruptions by parents to children was 1 to 25. The range of instances of simultaneous speech was 5 to 45.

All statistical analyses of interruptions were performed using percentages based on the number of each child's utterances. For interruptions, differences between number of interruptions by mothers versus fathers was just short of significance, with fathers interrupting more (Wilcoxon $W_s(16)=41$, $p < .088$). Comparison of speech to boys versus girls showed that parents were more likely to interrupt girls ($U(8,8) = 58$, $p < .09$). Thus, there was a tendency for fathers to interrupt more than mothers, and for both parents to interrupt girls more than boys.

Analyses of simultaneous speech were performed using percentages based on the total number of utterances of parent and child combined. Differences in the percentages of simultaneous speech between mothers and children versus fathers and children were highly significant ($W_s(16) = 8$, $p < .01$). Father-child pairs were more likely than mother-child pairs to speak at the same time. Further, both parents were more likely to engage in simultaneous speech with their daughters than with their sons ($U(8,8) = 52$, $p < .052$).

Since simultaneous speech involves both speakers, either the child or the parent could use the occurrence of simultaneous speech to maintain or gain control of the conversation. To determine who continued to speak, instances of simultaneous speech were analyzed. Results are presented in Table 3. Parents were significantly more likely to continue talking than

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Insert Table 3 about here

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were children (45% vs. 27% for mothers and children; $W_s(16) = 22.5$, $p < .02$; 48% vs. 28% for fathers and children; $W_s(15) = 13$, $p < .01$). About one quarter of the instances of simultaneous speech resulted in both the parent and child continuing to speak. Thus, parents do not gain conversational control everytime simultaneous speech occuss, but they do gain or keep control more often than their children do. There were no mother-father differences.

An analysis of children's interruptions of their parents showed no significant differences between boys and girls, although there was a trend for boys to interrupt both mothers and fathers more than girls ($\bar{X}$ for boys = 5.19; $\bar{X}$ for girls = 4.32). Further, there was no relationship between the number of times the child interrupted the parents and the number of times the child was interrupted by the parent.

Correlations were computed between the frequency of interruptions and simultaneous speech, to see if parents who interrupt a lot also engage

in a lot of simultaneous speech. For mothers and fathers, $r = .61$ ($p < .005$). Thus, parents seem to be consistent. Correlations were also computed to see if there was any consistency in the use of interruptions and simultaneous speech within families. Correlations between number of interruptions for mothers and fathers was .50 ($p < .05$). For simultaneous speech, $r = .48$ ($p < .05$). Thus, there does seem to be a family pattern.

DISCUSSION

To summarize the findings, it seems that fathers interrupt their children more than mothers do, and that both parents interrupt daughters more than sons. Also, fathers engage in simultaneous speech with their children more than mothers, and both parents exhibit more simultaneous speech with daughters. Further, parents were consistent in being either high or low on interruptions and simultaneous speech. Also, within families, mothers and fathers were similar in their styles.

If the use of interruptions and simultaneous speech is considered to be a sign of impoliteness to the other speaker, and a way of controlling conversations, then these results suggest that fathers are less sensitive to their children and are more controlling than mothers, and that both mothers and fathers are less sensitive to daughters than to sons. Why might fathers be less polite and more controlling than mothers? Perhaps they are behaving in accordance with prescriptions for the male role. Males are typically socialized to be dominant and to take charge of situations. They also tend to be more power conscious than women. Therefore fathers may demonstrate their high status and show their children who is in charge by controlling the conversations with their children, and interrupting and speaking simultaneously are two ways of doing this. Since men seem to interrupt more than women in adult conversations, it is not surprising that this occurs with

parent-child conversations. By interrupting, one can change topics, introduce new ideas, and so on, that is, one has control. Further, by interrupting, fathers are showing their children who is more powerful.

The next question that arises is why mothers and fathers seem more dominant toward daughters. Perhaps parents are using conversational techniques to teach their sons and daughters about their status or place in society. The message to girls is that they are more interruptible, which suggests, in a subtle way, that they are also not too important, or at least less so than boys. Also, adult men and women are used to interrupting women more than men (cf. Zimmerman and West, 1975), and this may extend to their interactions with their children.

What effects might this differential treatment have on the development of boys and girls? First, children are learning from observations that males and females behave differently, and that males are more dominant. Children also may be acquiring the sex-appropriate pattern; after all, modeling is a powerful teaching tool (cf. Bandura, 1968). Finally, boys and girls are getting different messages about their roles in society. Thus, children may learn about their overall status or role from the way they are treated; and, they may learn how to behave by modeling appropriate adults.

The finding that parents are consistent among themselves in style shows that children are getting the same message from the parent; either the child is interruptible, or not. Further, the family pattern suggests that children are getting relatively consistent treatment within a family. It is important to remember that the results reported here are mean differences. Not all families followed the pattern of treating boys and girls differently.

In sum, then, this paper looked at conversational management and found that fathers are more likely than mothers to interrupt and engage in simultaneous speech with their preschool children, and that both mothers

and fathers are more likely to interrupt and speak simultaneously with daughters than with sons. I suggested that fathers may use these techniques to control conversations with their children and that both parents may be more controlling with girls. Further research on parent-child conversations needs to be done to clarify the effects of situational factors, age differences, social class, and so on. Further analysis of subtle conversational management techniques, like the ones studied here, as well as patterns of pauses, intonation, etc. may reveal a variety of ways in which adult men and women speak differently, and ways in which they speak differently to boys and girls. Knowledge of these differences can give us insight into the processes of sex-role socialization and can provide us with the tools for social change.

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Footnotes

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Requests for reprints should be sent to: Esther Blank Greif, Department of Psychology, 64 Cummington Street, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts 02215.

Table 1

Mean Number of Utterances During

30-minute Play Session for

Mothers, Fathers, and Children

PARENT		CHILD		Total Utterances (Parent & Child)
Mother with son	551.25 (117.56)	Son with mother	291.00 (66.55)	842.25
Mother with daughter	545.75 (77.44)	Daughter with mother	293.00 (88.58)	838.75
Father with son	528.00 (109.72)	Son with father	277.38 (70.78)	805.38
Father with daughter	528.13 (135.47)	Daughter with father	354.00 (112.82)	882.13

Note.--Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2

Mean Number of Instances of Interruptions and Simultaneous Speech During 30-minute Play Sessions

INTERRUPTIONS					SIMULTANEOUS SPEECH	
PARENT		CHILD		Total per Dyad		
Mothers to sons	5.50 (3.82)	Sons to mothers	5.13 (3.52)	10.63	Mother-Son	13.13 (8.2)
Mothers to daughters	9.0 (7.73)	Daughters to mothers	4.50 (4.57)	13.50	Mother-Daughter	20.13 (11.27)
Fathers to sons	7.0 (5.55)	Sons to fathers	5.25 (2.19)	12.25	Father-Son	17.25 (11.91)
Fathers to daughters	9.75 (6.25)	Daughters to fathers	4.13 (3.09)	13.88	Father-Daughter	26.63 (10.57)

Note.--Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 3

Analysis of Instances of

Simultaneous Speech

	SPEECH CONTINUED BY		
	PARENT	CHILD	BOTH
MOTHER WITH SON	49%	23%	28%
MOTHER WITH DAUGHTER	40%	30%	30%
FATHER WITH SON	50%	26%	24%
FATHER WITH DAUGHTER	45%	30%	25%
TOTAL MEAN	46%	27%	27%